



## Increasing Physician Referrals to the Arthritis Self-Help Course

### Public Health Problem

The Utah Arthritis Program conducted social marketing research to develop effective messages and practical ways to reach women with arthritis and encourage them to participate in the Arthritis Self-Help Course. Utah found that none of the women with arthritis who participated in the research had been referred to self-help courses by their medical providers, even though self-help courses can reduce arthritis pain significantly. The lack of referrals appears to be widespread: in 1997, the Arthritis Self-Help Course reached less than 1% of people with arthritis nationwide.

### Evidence That Prevention Works

Developed at Stanford University, the Arthritis Self-Help Course teaches people how to better manage their arthritis and minimize its effects. This course, taught in a group setting, has been shown to reduce arthritis pain by 20% and physician visits by 40%.

### Program Example

With CDC support, the Utah Department of Health implemented a program to identify factors that influence physicians' referrals to arthritis self-help programs. Physicians' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to referring patients to arthritis self-help programs and other educational resources for arthritis were assessed. This research included five 2-hour focus groups comprising Utah primary care providers including nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and physicians. Additionally, all primary care providers in Utah (600 total) were mailed a survey, and 22% of these were returned. The findings of the survey support the findings of the focus groups. The primary findings were that the participants had a very low "top of mind" awareness of arthritis resources, felt "hopeless" about treating those with arthritis, had a desire for additional information about resources that could assist their patients, and would be more likely to recommend the Arthritis Self-Help Course if they received positive feedback from patients who had taken the course.

### Implications

The Arthritis Self-Help Course is a cost-saving intervention that reduces arthritis pain and physician visits. Using data from this research program, the Utah Department of Health has designed and implemented a provider-based quality improvement project focused on increasing participation in self-management programs such as the Arthritis Self-Help Course. More widespread use of the Arthritis Self-Help Course nationwide would save money and reduce the burden of arthritis. This program demonstrates the importance of research and understanding reasons physicians do not refer patients to this course, which allows various groups to develop interventions to increase physician referrals.

### Contact Information